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ABSTRACT

The French immersion experience in Montreal, since its inception in 1965, is considered highly successful. Despite critics who note that its results fall short of perfect bilingualism, French immersion has achieved what it set out to accomplish: functional bilingual competencies. In doing so, French immersion has challenged many assumptions about bilingualism through validation of several sociolinguistic and linguistic principles: that (1) a second language can be learned effectively if an approximation of the natural imitative environment in which the first language was learned can be created at school; (2) a second language is more easily learned when children are exposed to it in a sustained fashion from an early age; (3) because the principal function of language is communication, language learning should mean learning how to use the language for communicative purposes; and (4) a second language, like a first language, can be learned effectively if presented in the context of meaningful and relevant content. As a result, language can no longer be considered a collection of incomprehensible foreign codes but more generally perceived as tools of functional communication and creative expression. In addition, language is no longer a window through which culture is viewed, but provides opportunities for participation. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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PRACTICAL SECOND-LANGUAGE APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF FRENCH IMMERSION IN CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

The French immersion program described in this article is a program of bilingual education launched in Montreal in 1965. At that time a group of anglophone parents convinced a school board in the suburbs to start an experimental bilingual class in which instruction was to be given to anglophone children in both English and French. The success of the experience led to the opening of more classes and more programs which developed into the widely popular French immersion education. Immersion refers to the method used to teach all school subject matters through a second language, in this case French.

French immersion education begins at the kindergarten level. For the first three years, the students who arrive with no prior French language skills receive all of their instruction through the medium of the French language. Beginning at grade 3, formal English instruction is introduced for about 20% of school instruction time. The school subjects taught in English receive gradually more instruction time until instruction becomes 60% in French and 40% in English at the grade 7 level. The proportions are

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reversed at the secondary school level until instruction in French is reduced to about 20% of total instruction time at grade 12. Although French immersion has thus far been offered only from K to 12, some universities and post-secondary institutions in Canada have offered some courses in French.

The popularity of the program has helped it expand at a phenomenal rate. From one school and a handful of students in the experimental classes twenty-five years ago, there are now more than 17,000 schools offering French immersion instruction to approximately 250,000 students in all major Canadian cities. The popularity of the program is such that school boards, unable to cope with the demand because of the scarcity of qualified teachers, often resort to a sort of lottery system to choose from among the many applicants.

There are a number of reasons which account for the remarkable success of the French immersion programs in Canada. The most important of these include:

a. the changing attitudes toward the learning of a second language prompted by the waning of isolationist tendencies and increased cultural contacts with the rest of the world. Related to this reason is the dissatisfaction with the mediocre results achieved by traditional second-language teaching methodologies.

b. the growing acceptance of the bilingual character of a Canadian national identity operating in a multicultural setting, despite the recent highly-publicized vocal expressions of anti-French sentiments which took the form of city council

resolutions across the country declaring their cities to be English-only municipalities. In reality, a recent poll showed that more Canadians than ever support the bilingual identity of the country, and 75% of all Canadian respondents support bilingual education in the two official languages of the country. This support is even greater among francophones: 90% of francophone respondents to the same survey said that they supported bilingual (English/French) education for their children (National Survey, February 1990).

c. the positive empirical research and evaluation studies' findings about the academic and linguistic benefits of bilingualism generally, and about French immersion educational achievements in particular.

d. the growing perception among Canadians of the role of bilingual competencies as an instrument of socio-economic mobility in an officially bilingual country (Safty, 1989).

At the socio-educational level, French immersion education presents some interesting characteristics that partly account for its success. French immersion children are largely majority children, i.e., they come from anglophone homes. Their first language (English) enjoys high status power and is not threatened by the second language. Their socio-economic background is middle class and therefore more likely to provide them with a linguistically rich home environment. The majority of

French immersion teachers are native French speakers; the rest possess native-like fluency. Students are particularly enthusiastic and action-oriented. Classroom learning experiences are organized in activities that clearly emphasize interactions and oral communications between students, on the one hand, and between teacher and students, on the other. Parents are actively involved in school teacher-parent committees and take a sustained and marked interest in their children's school progress. They are also politically organized, enjoy a high profile, and are recognized as important stake-holders in policy-making decisions. French immersion students exhibit self-confidence and are aware of teachers' and parents' high expectations for their success. All of these factors and certain organizational decisions which may discourage access to the program to all but the most determined parents have prompted some critics to charge that French immersion education caters to the elite (Olson and Burns, 1983).

As a second language learning methodology, the French immersion experience in Canada may have revolutionized traditional approaches to language teaching insofar as it highlighted the communicative function of the language and the necessity of viewing the language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to be studied. At the same time, French immersion has had a dramatic impact on pedagogical approaches to all second-language teaching approaches insofar as it has demonstrated the possibility of using with profit the linguistic and sociolinguistic principles that facilitate first-language acquisition. The National Core French (1989) Project, launched by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers and funded by the Canadian government, recently

proposed a syllabus-based second-language curriculum called "communicative/experiential" (The National Core French Study). It is based on many of the operative principles of French immersion. This article proposes to review some of the sociolinguistic and linguistic principles underpinning the French immersion approach to language teaching. It will also identify areas in second-language learning and teaching in which the insights offered by the French immersion experience can have practical and constructive applications.

FRENCH IMMERSION PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS IN FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (FSL)

I. French immersion primarily relies on the assumption that it is possible to create in the school a natural imitative environment that resembles the one in which the child learns his first language. For language learning purposes, the home environment may be described as one in which there is constant exposure to the language, the parents as role models use a caretaker speech to communicate with the child and to introduce progressively in their speech more complex sentence structures as the child's comprehension grows. The child's linguistic comprehension precedes oral production; there is total integration between culture and language, each reinforcing the other. The level of parental education influences the variety and richness of the child's linguistic environment and has an impact on first language learning. First language learning at home is a process of trial and error. Naturally, French immersion could not hope to replicate all these conditions at the school, but it achieves what may be

considered a satisfactory approximation with remarkably good results for second-language learning.

The application of this principle to second-language situations means among other things that the linguistic environment in the second-language classroom must be as close an approximation as possible of the natural imitative environment of the first language. To achieve this second-language teachers need to interiorize a number of operational principles.

a. The teacher's role as a language model and mediator between the language and the learner is crucially important for it behooves him/her to make the learning environment linguistically rich and varied and to organize learning activities which cover a wide gamut of authentic and relevant language experiences.

b. The second language must cease to be a language to study and become a language to use. Language activities should, therefore, emphasize the "use" of the language in as many authentic and varied language situations as it is possible to create.

c. Students will acquire and learn the second language by imitation and through a process of trial and error. Therefore, linguistic errors need to be viewed as an integral part of the learning process and should not be construed to mean failure to learn.

d. The development of the second-language learner's comprehension and oral production skills should be given priority over other skills in the first years of exposure to the second language.

II. French immersion is also based on the assumption that early exposure to a second language is better than late exposure. This assumption is challenged by some who argue that there is no evidence to suggest that there is "a drastic decline" of second-language learning abilities at any age (Ekstrand, 1979). It is also challenged on the basis of anthropological research findings on non-Western societies, suggesting that adults can learn a second language perfectly (Hill, 1970). Other researchers argue that any advantage young learners may have can be compensated for by using appropriate teaching approaches with older learners (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). Research on the authentic control of the phonology of a second language, however, supports the notion that children acquire authentic pronunciation while adults generally do not (Brown, 3: 48-49). In addition, while adults will acquire the morphology and the syntax of a second language faster than children, young learners will ultimately attain higher proficiency (Krashen, Long, and Scarcella, 1979). Children are believed to demonstrate greater language learning abilities than adults (Edwards & Casserly, 1976), possibly because of their brain plasticity in large areas of uncommitted cortex--especially in the left hemisphere where the structures of language are laid down--which diminishes as the child grows older and passes from the natural imitative language-learning stage to the conceptual learning stage. French immersion implicitly accepts the validity of this notion and consequently places considerable store on the authentic

control of the phonology of the second language during the first years of the program. This results, in the initial stages, in the relegation to secondary importance of the issues of morphology and syntax and the valorization of comprehension and oral production skills. French immersion also derives benefit from a corollary to the principle of "early is better": the concept that children's metalinguistic competencies experience their fastest growth between the ages of 4 and 8 years (Hakes, 1980). This means that at this age the child may be able to learn a second and a third language almost as easily as he learned his first language (Wilton, 1978).

Practically speaking, second-language teachers can use with profit the principle of early is better. The most obvious route to take would be to persuade the school administration to introduce second-language classes from the earliest possible grades. School administrators and parents need to be reassured that it is possible for linguistic and cognitive competencies to develop simultaneously in L1 and L2 (Wilton, 1978). Any careful planning for the introduction of immersion programs and the expansion of second-language programs must take into account the availability of qualified teachers, the impact on established school programs and personnel, the adequacy of teaching resources and curriculum materials, and the need to secure the support of senior district administrators.

III. The major methodological thrust of French immersion is the so-called communicative approach to language teaching. The students are provided with learning situations that emphasize oral sills and a wide range of communicative competencies (Van Ek, 1986; Glucksber, Krauss, and Higgins, 1975). The underlying assumption is

that learning a language is learning to use that language. The goal is to produce students who are "functionally bilingual" (Beatens Beardsmore, 1982), i.e., able to use the second-language in a variety of authentic situations.

The practical transfer of this principle from French immersion to second-language classes can be facilitated in a number of ways. First, second-language teachers can organize their language activities around meaningful content of interest to the students, emphasizing the use of the language. One way of doing that would be to proceed by themes identified by the students themselves. The thematic approach is used by many second-language teachers who find that the flexibility it offers allows for enhanced cultural awareness and improved linguistic skills (King, 1990). A second possible way of implementing the principle of the primacy of the functional use of the language consists of organizing immersion weekends in which the second-language learners will spend the weekend with a family speaking the second language. A third way consists in organizing regular field trips to various areas of the community where the second language is spoken, and in inviting members of that community to come to the classroom to make presentations in the second language about areas of knowledge already familiar to the students through the first language.

IV. French immersion accepts the notion that there may be interferences between English (the first language of the majority of the students) and the second language being learned, in this case French. But the similarities between the two languages and the positive transfers they facilitate are much more significant in terms of linguistic and cognitive development than the differences. Ringborn (1987)

drew attention to the important role that previous knowledge, cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic similarities play in facilitating second-language learning. Linguistic skills acquired in the first language may be tapped to facilitate the acquisition and the development of linguistic skills in the second language (Adamson, 1988).

This can be accomplished more readily in the case of languages sharing considerable commonalities such as French and English (English and German; French, Italian and Spanish) than with languages sharing little or no similarities (English and Chinese or French and Arabic). Thus the considerable commonalities of French and English Man be put to profitable use by the second-language teacher. For instance, the common genetic sources and the use by English and French (and Spanish and Italian) of Latin and Greek loan words in the form of radicals, prefixes, and suffixes, have resulted in considerable vocabulary similarities. One study identified 4500 anglicisms in French and 6000 gallicisms in English (Mackenzie, 1939, cited in Hammer, 11:66). A systematic review of the *Larousse Dictionnaire Moderne Français-Anglais* (1960) found that there were almost 11,000 English-French cognates with the same or similar spelling and meaning (Hammer, 1976), and concluded that the use of cognates (for example, German *wasser* and English *water)* can help vocabulary acquisition in the second language.

V. Language learning in French immersion is contextualized. That is to say the language learning in French occurs almost as a by-product of the children's interaction with meaningful content. In other words, the language is used more as a vehicle for teaching subject

matter than it is studied as a subject. The underlying assumption is that children are more interested in content than in the form of what they learn (McLaughlin, Rossman & McLeod, 1983). Further, the development of the child's intelligence is assumed to influence positively and to give impetus to the development of his linguistic abilities. Cognitive growth may precede and consequently reinforce linguistic growth. In the French immersion methodology, the primary focus is not the learning of a second language but rather the learning of academic content through the medium of a second language.

The practical application of this principle of contextualization can be facilitated by organizing second-language activities in such a fashion so as to extend knowledge already acquired in other school subject matter using the second language as a medium of instruction. This may be accomplished through the creation of mini-immersion experiences. Specifically, the second-language teacher, in cooperation with the school administrators and other teachers involved, decides on a block of time during the school year--say the first two weeks of October and the first two weeks of March--and declare them to be immersion weeks. This declaration means that during this time the second-language learners will have a mini-immersion experience in which they will be totally immersed in the second language. All school subjects will be taught during this experience by using the second language as a medium of instruction. Obviously this strategy can be implemented more easily at the elementary level than at the secondary level with its compartmentalized and specialized approach to teaching. Alternatively, mini-immersion experiences can be created in different ways, for instance, one day a week may be declared immersion day in which

the second language becomes the sole language of communication in the classroom. The second-language teacher can also, in cooperation with colleagues and administrators, teach some class periods of another school subject by using the second language as the language of instruction. Thus, a social studies project may be taught in Spanish; an arts project may be conducted in French. Physical education is a particularly interesting activity to teach in the second language. The spontaneous and energetic impulses physical education helps release in the students create a dynamic disposition to receive and use information sensitized by the "heat" of the physical energy and excitement. The use of the second language in a physical education class can give second-language learning a naturalness and an authenticity that classroom situations cannot duplicate.

CONCLUSION

The French immersion experience in Canada is generally considered the most successful teaching program in the annals of foreign language teaching (Krashen, 1984: 61). It has its share of critics and detractors and falls short of achieving what many people unfairly expected to be perfect bilingualism. But it does achieve what it set out to accomplish: the imparting of functional bilingual competencies, in the sense of being able to use the second language in a variety of authentic situations, to students who otherwise would not be considered functionally bilingual. It does so by boldly challenging many of the erroneous assumptions about bilingualism and by giving a

vivid demonstration of the validity of a number of socio-linguistic and linguistic principles. The most significant of these may be summarized as follows:

a. A second language can be learned effectively if an approximation of the natural imitative environment in which the first language was learned can be created at school.

b. A second language is more easily learned when children are exposed to it in a sustained fashion from an early age.

c. Since the principal function of a language is its communicative attribute, learning a language should mean learning how to use that language for communicative purposes.

d. A second language, like a first language, can be learned effectively if it is presented in a context of meaningful and relevant content to which the learner can relate.

There may be little by way of revolutionary thought in these preceding principles, but the challenge resides not in intellectually apprehending their meaning but in interiorizing their philosophical implications. This, in effect, affects not only how second languages are taught but also how we relate to all languages as ubiquitous symbols of culture and indispensable tools of communication. Languages will no longer be a collection of incomprehensible "foreign" codes representing alien and distant cultures. They will come to be more generally

perceived as tools of functional communication and creative expressions. Learning a second and a third language will be more widely viewed as an enriching, and linguistically and culturally stimulating experience--one of the few experiences which, like music, transcend man-made artificial differences to connect with and highlight the common destiny of humanity.

Finally, it is necessary to say a few words about language and culture. It is commonplace nowadays to assert that a language cannot be divorced from its culture, but it is a statement that bears repeating. Language learning is intimately linked to learning about the culture of which the language is a powerful symbol. Learning a second language becomes, therefore, learning a symbol of intercultural communication. And it is this aspect of intercultural communication that needs to be emphasized. French immersion does not offer an example in this regard since it is essentially based on a school curriculum which is identical to the English curriculum cast in all the paradigms of the dominant culture (Safty, 1988). Effective intercultural communication involves more than a simple intellectual appreciation of an "alien" culture. It requires the establishment of bridges of empathic interactions between two cultures with different but valuable and equal codes and symbols for the interpretation of man's existence. Learning a second language needs to be viewed no longer as a window (Corson, 1989) through which the culture can be observed but as a wide-open door through which the culture makes itself accessible. The second language learner is invited to enter and "feel" the creative energies, relate to the communicative codes and the interpretive symbols that collectively are enabling a group of people to make sense of, give meanings to, and point to

new directions in their common existence. The least the second language learner can do is to accept graciously the invitation and attempt to relate empathically to the culture that has just laid its soul bare.

Practically speaking, the second-language classroom can become a meeting point of different cultures. Representatives of the culture of the second language should become frequent visitors to the second-language classroom. This will give the language and its culture relevancy and immediacy that surpass many academic activities that can be organized. The sociology of settlement of new immigrants in North America is such that there is little equal interaction between representatives of the dominant culture and the new immigrants. The classroom can be a forum from which the cultural values of the second language can be presented in a valorizing fashion by the representatives of the culture. These cultural interactions should help demystify differences while emphasizing commonalities--a necessary step toward lowering prejudices and facilitating equal interactions. The learning of a second language as an intellectual and affective intercultural communicative tool can make a significant contribution to this process.

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